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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the nature and effectiveness of elementary transition classes (TCs) used by the Austin (Texas) Independent School District (AISD) as an alternative to retention to improve low achievers' achievement. Data were examined concerning the number and nature of TCs operating in the AISD during 1987-88; achievement progress of students in TCs at Langford, Casis, and Oak Hill elementary schools in 1986-87; and achievement progress of students in a TC at Metz Elementary School in 1983-84. Goals for first-grade TCs, criteria for selection of students and successful completion of the transition program, parental involvement, and reading and mathematics achievement were analyzed. Focus was on transition from grade 1 to 2. 1987-88 TCs included 13 first- and 4 second-grade classes meeting all day, 2 first-grade classes for language arts, and 1 first-grade class for language arts and mathematics. There were 225 first and 57 second graders in the TCs. Results do not provide any strong support for the notion that TCs are any better for low achievers' long-term achievement than are transitional retention programs; short-term progress may be greater, but long-term progress is quite similar. TCs might be more effective if they are designed to: be 2-year packages; lead to promotion; promote a higher percentage of students; and provide students with supplemental help throughout their school careers. Six data tables and six graphs are provided. (TJH)

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TRANSITION CLASSES VS. RETENTION--BETTER OR JUST DIFFERENT?

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Austin Independent School District
Office of Research and Evaluation

Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association in San Francisco, March, 1989.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

If Retention is Not Effective with Many Low Achievers, What Is? 1

Are Elementary Transition Classes a Better Alternative Than Traditional Retention? 2

Elementary Transition Classes, 1987-88 3
- Student Characteristics 3
- First Grade Goals 4
- Criteria for Selection/Exit 6
- Parent Involvement 6

Effects of 1986-87 Elementary Transition Classes . . . 7
- Promotion/Placement 8
- Achievement Gains (ITBS) 8

Effects of the 1983-84 Transition Class at Metz 11
- Focus and Goals 12
- Achievement Gains (ITBS) 12

Summary/Implications 16

Discussion 17

Bibliography 19

IF RETENTION IS NOT EFFECTIVE WITH MANY LOW ACHIEVERS, WHAT IS?

Each year large numbers of AISD students repeat a grade or fail to earn enough credits to be promoted (3,216 students, for instance, in 1987-88). Past AISD and national research has raised serious questions about the effectiveness of retention in improving the achievement of most low achievers. In fact, the research suggests retention generally may have a negative impact on long-term achievement and may increase dropout risk. It is easier, of course, to say retention is not working for most students than to point to better alternatives. Once low achievers are placed or promoted instead of retained, what can be done to meet their special needs? The alternatives are numerous:

- Transition classes and programs,
- Compensatory reading and/or mathematics programs (e.g., Chapter 1, Chapter 1 Migrant, SCE, bilingual, Teach and Reach),
- Special curriculum groupings (across and within grades),
- Tutoring (by teachers, older students, parents, and peers),
- Effective or Priority School approaches,
- Motivational instructional techniques,
- Extended school day, and
- Summer school.

This paper focuses on the nature and effectiveness of elementary transition classes in use in AISD. A paper for another symposium, Secondary Retention Alternative--Austin ISD, deals with the Transitional Academic Program (TAP) and the Academic Incentive Program (AIP) for junior high and middle school students.

ARE ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASSES A BETTER ALTERNATIVE THAN TRADITIONAL RETENTION?

The following questions are important in addressing this key question:

- What are transition classes?
- To what extent are transition classes in use in AISD elementary schools?
- What is the instructional focus for transition classes?
- What are the goals of these programs?
- Are transitional programs effective?

One central point is that placement in a transition class is an alternative to traditional retention but may or may not prevent a student from spending two years in the same grade. Another is that, at the elementary level, first grade has the highest retention rate. Alternatives to retention at grades 1 and 2 therefore have high priority.

Most programs place students in a transition class if it is felt they cannot successfully complete the regular curriculum for the grade. The programs vary in the students selected, the curriculum and approaches used, and the factors examined later in deciding to retain, place, or promote. Some transition classes focus more on essentials of on-grade curriculum, while others provide more remediation.

Information was examined for transition classes in several ways:

- The number and nature of transition classes operating in AISD in 1987-88 (based on data collected from schools in the fall),
- Achievement progress of 1986-87 students in transition classes at Langford, Casis, and Oak Hill elementary schools, and
- Achievement progress of 1983-84 students in a transition class at Metz Elementary School.

ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASSES, 1987-88

A questionnaire was sent in November, 1987, to all elementary school principals to determine where transition classes were in use for the school year and their characteristics. Seventeen elementary schools reported having a total of 20 transition classes in the fall of 1987. This is an increase from the four known transition classes in 1986-87.

Transition classes in 1987-88 consisted of:

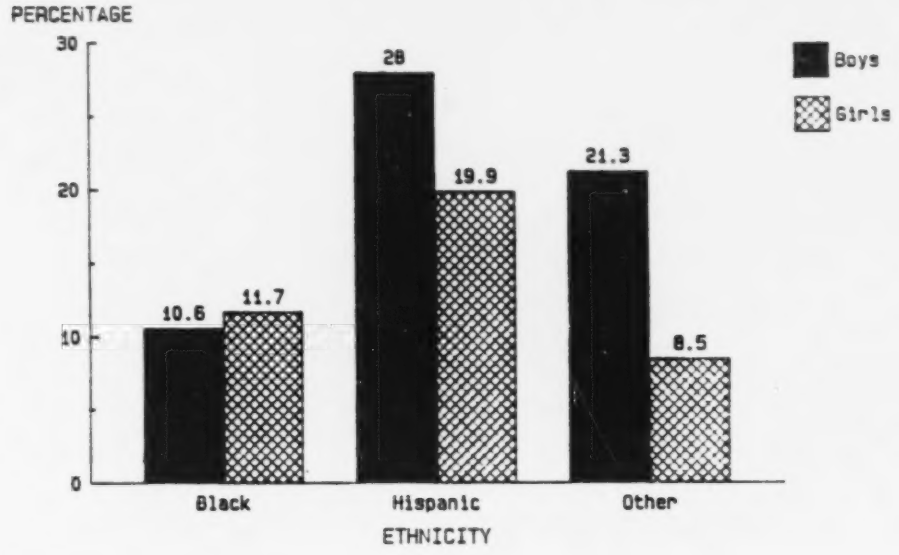
- All-day classes. There were 13 first grade classes and four second grade classes meeting all day. The average class size for all-day programs was 14 pupils.
- Language arts. Two first grade transition classes met for language arts only.
- Language arts/mathematics. There was one first grade transition class at Kocurek that was the equivalent of a language arts/mathematics class only.

Enrollment at the time of the November survey totalled 282 first and second graders.

Student Characteristics

First grade classes consisted of more than half Hispanic students (118 of 225 total), with 20% of the students being Black and 27.6% Anglo/Other. The 57 second graders were split fairly equally among Black students (18), Hispanics (17), and Others (22). More first grade boys than girls were placed in transition programs (63%), but the second grade group was evenly divided, 28 boys and 29 girls.

Figure 1. FALL, 1987, FIRST AND SECOND GRADE TRANSITION STUDENTS



Total Transition Students = 282.

First Grade Goals

The instructional focus for first grade transition classes in 1987-88 varied from school to school. In seven of the elementary schools surveyed, the focus was to provide kindergarten remediation with some first grade material. Six schools reported using modified instructional strategies with first grade materials, and one school checked both kindergarten remediation and teaching the elements of first grade as its goal on the questionnaire.

The Linguistically Oriented Multi-Sensory (LOMS) approach, an integrated way of teaching language arts skills, was used in 11 of the 13 first grade transitional classes.

A relationship exists between the stated aim of the curriculum as reported in the questionnaires and expectations at the schools for promotion of their first grade students. It was found that if a remedial kindergarten curriculum was given as the goal at a school, then the number of children expected to be promoted was substantially less than the number expected to be promoted from a school using a first grade curriculum.

Figure 2. FALL, 1987, PROMOTION EXPECTATIONS FOR TRANSITIONAL FIRST GRADERS, BY CURRICULUM

Curriculum	School	Enrolled	Expected to be Promoted	Expected Promotion Rate
Kindergarten remediation and as much first grade material as student progress allowed	1.Allison	7	0	
	2.Becker	16	0	
	3.Govalle	12	12	
	4.Oak Hill	16	1	
	5.Patton	16	3	
	6.Widen	15	4	
	7.Winn	12	0	
	Total	94	20	21%
All essential elements of first grade with modified instructional strategies	1.Brentwood	14	5	
	2.Brooke	28	20	
	3.Kocurek	12	0	
	4.Langford	17	6	
	5.Travis Hts.	36	33	
	6.Zavala	11	9	
	Total	118	73	62%
Both kindergarten remediation and essential elements of first grade	1.Allan	13	10	
	Total	13	10	77%

Expectations for promotion were also much greater for second grade transition classes than for those classes serving first graders.

Figure 3. FALL, 1987, PROMOTION EXPECTATIONS FOR TRANSITIONAL FIRST AND SECOND GRADERS

Class	Enrolled	Expected to Be Promoted
1st Grade	225	103 (45.8%)
2nd Grade	57	55 (96.5%)
TOTAL	282	158 (56.0%)

Criteria for Selection/Exit

The selection of children for transition classes for 1987-88 was done in the preceding spring in 10 of the schools, while six campuses reported identifying students for the program in both the spring and fall terms. One school waited until the fall to select its students for that semester.

The question on the survey calling for ranking of criteria used in selecting transitional students was complex; 10 of the 17 schools did not respond as desired. For the seven schools which did provide usable responses, Figure 3 summarizes the overall ranking of criteria used (with 1 as most important and 7 as least important).

Figure 4. CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF STUDENTS

Ranking	Factor
Most Important	1. Inadequate listening skills, following directions, etc.
	2. Assessments designed by teachers (e.g., tests, observations)
	3. Physical immaturity (auditory, visual, eye-hand coordination, etc.)
	4. Need for oral language development
	5. Poor scores on achievement tests (MRT or ITBS)
	6. Social immaturity
Least Important	7. Emotional immaturity

To the question, "Can students exit the transitional class during the year to join a regular class at the grade level?", 12 schools answered yes, 4 said no, and 1 replied that the situation had not come up. Two schools qualified their answers by writing that students could leave the transitional program during the first six weeks of the fall semester only. Criteria cited for allowing a child to leave the program were parental decision and teacher assessment.

Parent Involvement

Most schools informed parents of the intended placement of students in the transitional program for 1987-88 by conferences held with teachers in the spring followed by a letter or the signing of permission forms. Thirteen of the 17 schools indicated that parents could refuse the placement.

EFFECTS OF 1986-87 ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASSES

Three schools in 1986-87 (of probably no more than six in all) served a total of 61 students in transition classes over the course of the year. Casis offered language arts and/or mathematics placement, and all-day programs were provided at Langford and Oak Hill. Casis upgraded its kindergarten program for the transition students, while the other two schools offered a modified first grade curriculum. All had strong teachers according to the principals.

Figure 5. 1986-87 FIRST GRADE TRANSITION CLASSES

	Casis	Langford	Oak Hill
Criteria:	MRT, mathematics diagnostics; teacher recommendation; lacked prerequisite skills.	ITBS less than 30%ile; behind academically, not socially.	Developmentally not ready for regular grade 1. Used Gesell identification criteria.
Number of Students*:	28	17	16
Curriculum:	Served in language arts and/or math. Students pulled for areas of need from other first grade classes in a.m. Upgraded kindergarten program in language-rich environment. Emphasis reading; strong teacher.	Geared down regular first grade curriculum and supplements; attended art, music, PE with others; strong teacher; program ran most of the day.	Regular first grade curriculum plus Super Kids. Used Math Their Way, Addison-Wesley, plus math cubes. Students stayed all day. Strong teacher.
Expectation:	Retention or promotion possible.	Retention or promotion possible.	Retention probable, promotion possible.
Status:	Retained: 21 (75%) Placed: 5 (18%) Promoted: 1 (4%) Left AISD: 1 (4%)	Retained: 7 (41%) Placed: 0 Promoted: 7 (41%) Left AISD: 3 (18%)	Retained: 10 (63%) Placed: 0 Promoted: 0 Left AISD: 6 (38%)

* The number of students differs from those published in ORE Pub. No. 86.31 because these are cumulative for the entire year.

Promotion/Placement

By fall, 1987, 51 of the 61 1986-87 transition students were still in AISD. Ten of the children (16%) had left AISD, and their promotion status is unknown. Of the 51 students remaining, 13 or 26% were promoted or placed in the next grade--

- 75% (38 students) were retained in grade 1 for another year.
- 10% (5 students) were placed in grade 2 for the fall, having failed to meet promotion criteria but with alternative instructional provisions made available to them.
- 16% (8 students) were promoted to second grade.

Achievement Gains (ITBS)

Achievement gains in the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores are shown in Figures 6-9 for four groups of low achievers. The first two groups were in transition classes:

- 1986-87 transitional students who were retained in first grade at the end of their transitional year, and

- 1986-87 transitional students who were promoted or placed in second grade at the end of the year.

The other two groups were not in transition classes but experienced traditional retention in schools across the District:

- 1986-87 retained kindergarten students who were not placed in a transitional first grade, but who were placed or promoted into first grade following their year of retention; and

- 1986-87 regular first graders who were retained in first grade at the end of the year.

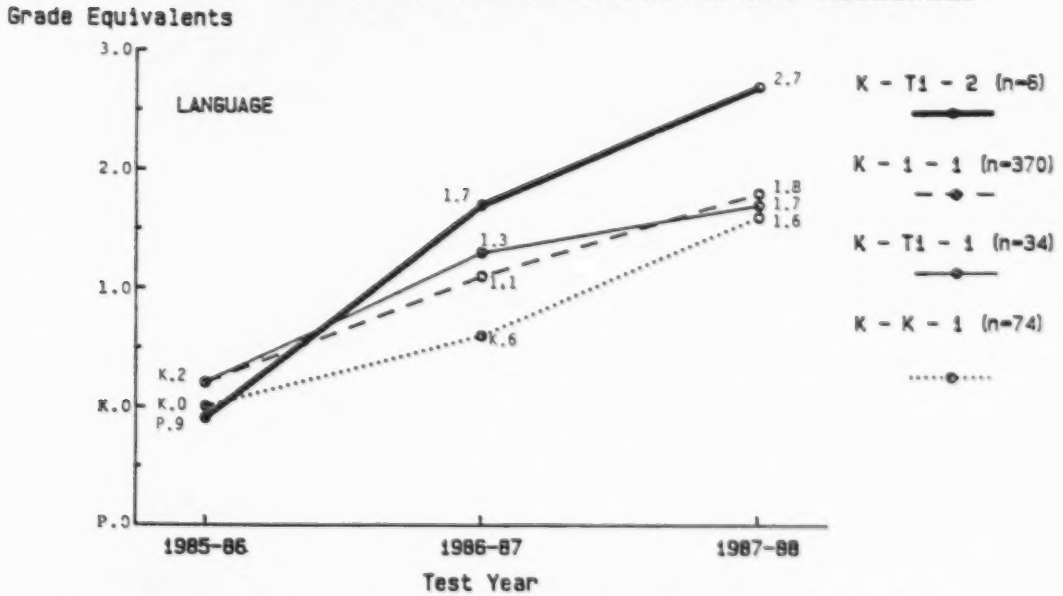
Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9 show ITBS scores for these students over three years--1985-86, 1986-87, and 1987-88.

Figure 6. ITBS GRADE EQUIVALENT (GE) GAINS FOR 1986-87 TRANSITION STUDENTS AND RETAINEES

Grade Pattern	n	GE 85-86	GAIN	GE 86-87	GAIN	GE 87-88
L A N G U A G E						
1. K - T1 - 1	34	K.2	+1.1	1.3	+ .4	1.7
2. K - T1 - 2	6	P.9	+1.6	1.7	+1.0	2.7
3. K - K - 1	74	K.0	+ .6	K.6	+1.0	1.6
4. K - 1 - 1	370	K.2	+ .9	1.1	+ .7	1.8
R E A D I N G						
1. K - T1 - 1	34	K.2*	+ .7	K.9	+ .8	1.7
2. K - T1 - 2	6	P.9*	+1.5	1.6	+1.1	2.7
3. K - K - 1	74	K.0*	+ .6	K.6	+ .8	1.4
4. K - 1 - 1	370	K.2*	+ .7	K.9	+ .8	1.7
*Based on Language Score						
M A T H E M A T I C S						
1. K - T1 - 1	34	K.2	+1.0	1.2	+ .8	2.0
2. K - T1 - 2	6	K.1	+1.6	1.7	+ .9	2.6
3. K - K - 1	74	K.1	+ .6	K.7	+1.1	1.8
4. K - 1 - 1	370	K.2	+1.0	1.2	+ .8	2.0

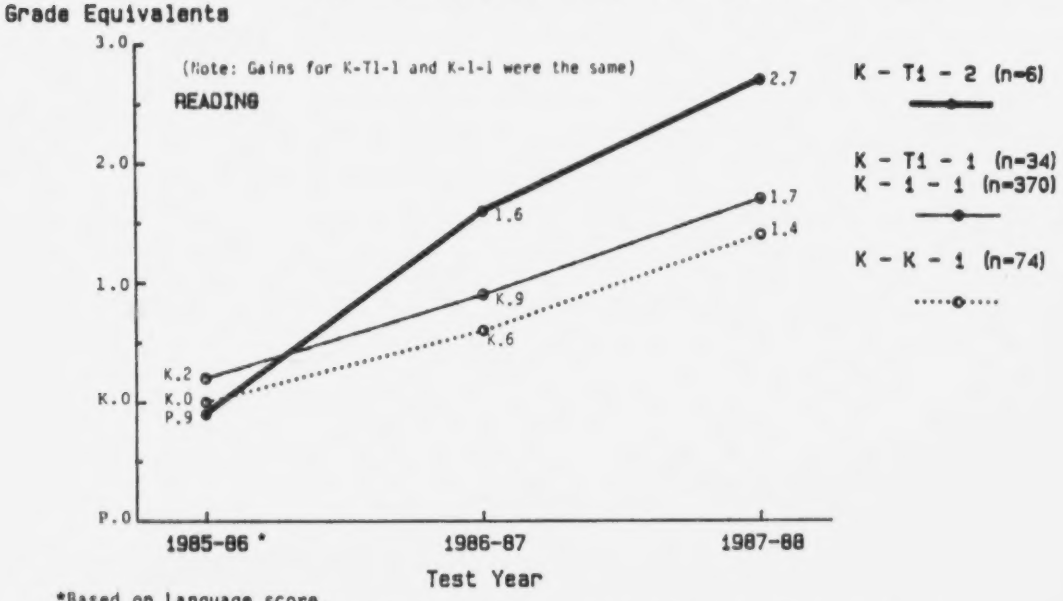
Note 1: GRADE PATTERNS: K=Kindergarten, T1=Transitional First Grade, 1=First Grade, 2=Second Grade.
Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENTS: National norm for K is K.8, Grade 1=1.8, Grade 2=2.8. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE for every year of instruction.

Figure 7. ITBS ACHIEVEMENT IN LANGUAGE FOR TRANSITION STUDENTS AND RETAINEES



Note 1: GRADE PATTERNS: K=Kindergarten, T1=Transitional First Grade, 1=First Grade, 2=Second Grade.
Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENTS: National norm for K is K.8, Grade 1=1.8, Grade 2=2.8. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE every year.

Figure 8. ITBS ACHIEVEMENT IN READING FOR TRANSITION STUDENTS AND RETAINEES

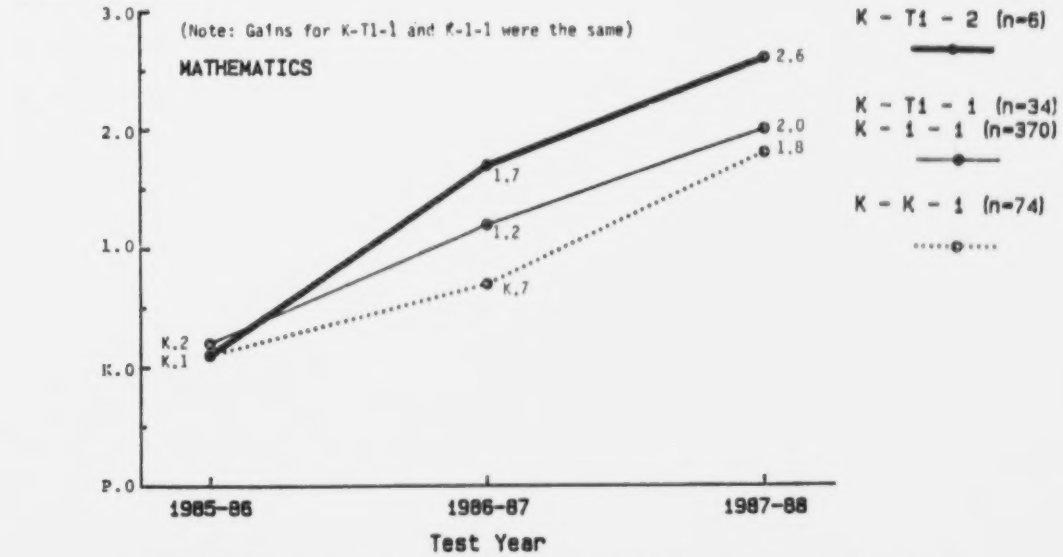


*Based on Language score.

Note 1: GRADE PATTERNS: K=Kindergarten, T1=Transitional First Grade, 1=First Grade, 2=Second Grade.

Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENTS: National norm for K is K.8, Grade 1=1.8, Grade 2=2.8. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE every year.

Figure 9. ITBS ACHIEVEMENT IN MATHEMATICS FOR TRANSITION STUDENTS AND RETAINEES



Note 1: GRADE PATTERNS: K=Kindergarten, T1=Transitional First Grade, 1=First Grade, 2=Second Grade.

Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENTS: National norm for K is K.8, Grade 1=1.8, Grade 2=2.8. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE every year.

These data must be considered suggestive rather than conclusive because transitional sample sizes were small and students were not randomly assigned to groups. With very small numbers of students who are all taught by one or a small number of teachers, the impact on achievement of the skill of the teacher and the specific instructional practices employed cannot be separated from the retention or transition experience.

Of the four groups, students who participated in the transitional first grade and were then placed or promoted into grade 2 showed the best overall progress. Of the transitional students, those placed or promoted made better gains than those retained after the transition class year. Thus, it appears some students did benefit from the transition classes and were quite successful thereafter (scoring just below the national average at grade 2).

The other three groups, all retained at either grade K or 1, showed similarly small achievement gains over the three-year period studied. Gains were smaller during the year repeated in both language and mathematics. Reading gains were slightly larger during the retention year (note that the reading score for the kindergarten year was actually the language score).

These data suggest that:

- Retaining students at kindergarten is not more beneficial than at grade 1, and
- Transitional first grade, if followed by retention, is not more beneficial than regular first grade followed by retention.

It is difficult to say whether these students would have performed better if promoted.

EFFECTS OF THE 1983-84 ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASS AT METZ

Transition classes have been in use sporadically in the District for years. Metz Elementary School operated a first grade transition class in 1983-84 which was considered quite successful by school staff initially. Not an all-day program, the Metz language arts class was designed to bring struggling kindergarten students to first grade level and to keep them there, by providing remediation for whatever skills were lacking.

Focus and Goals

Kindergarten students in need of special help for the next year were identified by teachers in the spring of 1983, and first graders were assessed for the program after the start of school in the fall. Students were selected who lacked basic skills (not knowing colors, for example), and who typically had short attention spans and physical manipulative problems.

The goals for the language arts transitional program at Metz were to provide:

- An alternative approach, "whole person learning," using movement, small and repeated goals, positive reinforcement, kinesthetic activities with clay and sand, and

- An alternative curriculum, reading poetry and nursery rhymes aloud, using activities devised to lengthen attention spans, using oral and visual language development but concentrating intensively on basics.

It was hoped that the class would give the transitional first graders a positive, successful experience, and redress their lack of basic skills.

In sum, 18 students, seven girls and 11 (61%) boys, participated in the transitional class. There was one Black, six Anglo/Others, and 11 (61%) Hispanic students. Participating students came from the Metz and Barrington neighborhoods, as these were paired schools that year.

Two students were placed out of the program during the course of the school year (one to regular first grade language arts and one into special education), and the 16 others were retained in first grade at the end of the spring semester. The promotion rate, then, for this small class was low (under 6%). It is important to note, however, that of those remaining in AISD elementary schools as of spring, 1988, no student from this Metz transition class has been retained in any grade in subsequent years.

Achievement Gains (ITBS)

Data on the students participating in the Metz transition class were examined to see if the pattern of achievement growth varied from that seen with traditional retention. While nearly all of the students were retained after participating in the transition class, the transition class

did provide a more structured program tailored to students' needs before the retention year. The program was considered successful at the time.

District data over several years have shown that:

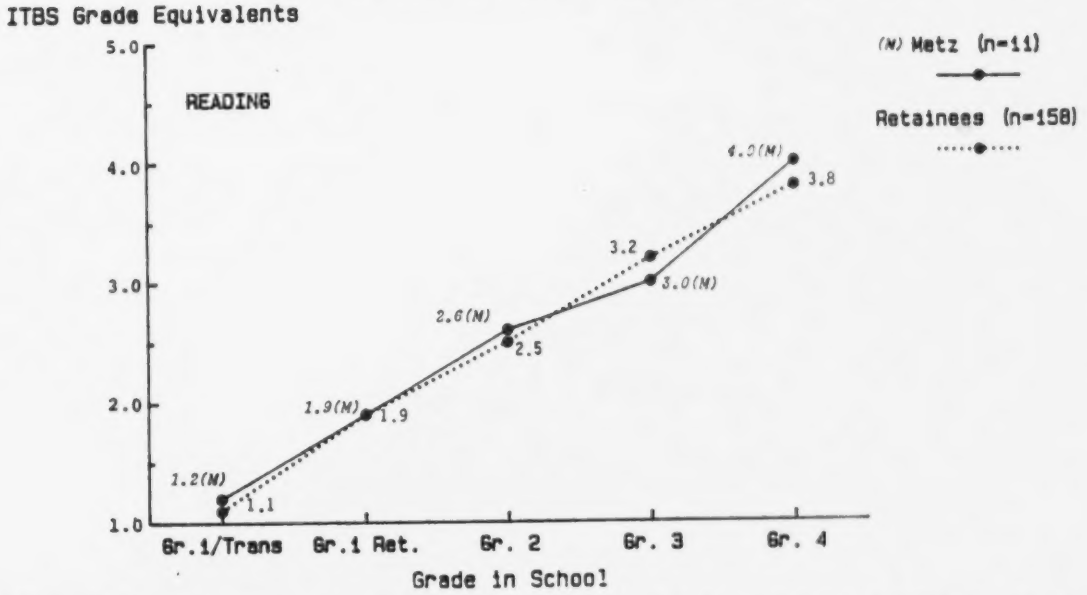
- Traditional retainees improve in reading gains during the grade repeated but decline in growth rates thereafter, and
- Traditional retainees decline in mathematics gains during the repeated grade but improve thereafter.

One hypothesis for why this occurs is that students are more often retained because of reading problems and receive more emphasis on this while retained. Once promoted, whatever special help was provided during the retention year was not sufficient to maintain desired growth. In mathematics, the opposite may occur. Students are not challenged with new material and may not need or receive as much special help while retained. Once promoted and presented with new material, their growth rate improves. (See Retention or Promotion, ORE Pub. No. 86.31).

Figures 10 and 11 show the achievement growth patterns in reading and mathematics for transition class participants at Metz from 1983-84 (the year they were in the transition class) to the current school year, 1987-88, and for regular first grade retainees (retained in 1981-82) from 1980-81 through 1984-85.

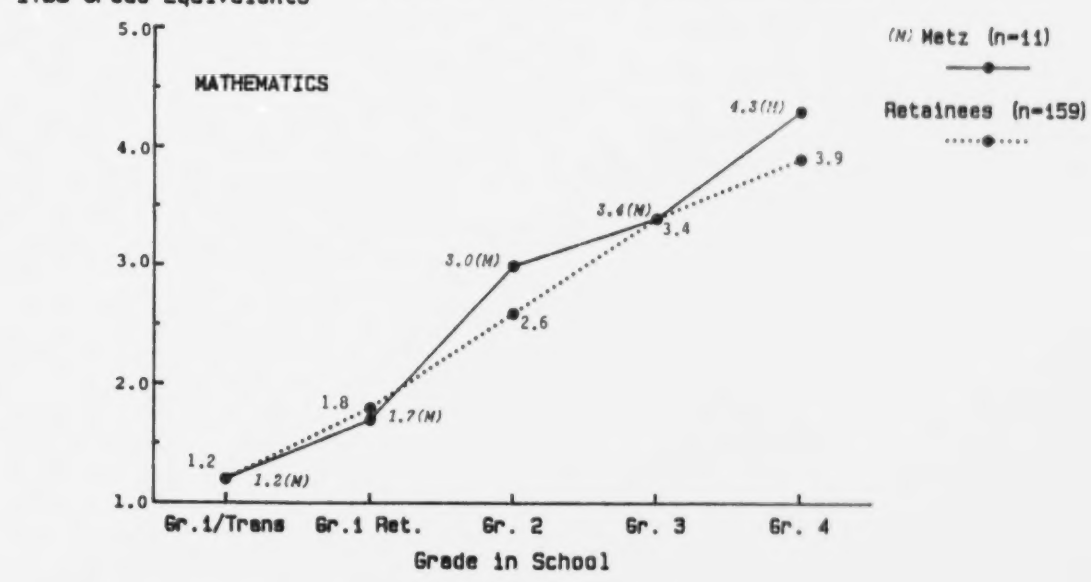
The patterns of growth are similar for both the Metz transition participants eventually retained in grade 1 and regular first grade retainees.

Figure 10. FIRST GRADERS RETAINED AND IN METZ TRANSITION CLASS--ITBS READING GE'S



Note: GRADE EQUIVALENT: National norm is 1.8 for Grade 1 through 4.8 for Grade 4. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE for every year of instruction.

Figure 11. FIRST GRADERS RETAINED AND IN METZ TRANSITION CLASS--ITBS MATHEMATICS GE'S



Note: GRADE EQUIVALENT: National norm is 1.8 for Grade 1 through 4.8 for Grade 4. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE for every year of instruction.

Further investigation of the Metz data reveals the following:

- Average grade equivalent (GE) gains during the transition class year were excellent in both reading (1.38) and mathematics (1.34) (see Figure 12). Gains dropped in both areas the next year when students were retained (to .78 in reading and .53 in mathematics).
- While most students showed gains of greater than 1.0 GE in both areas during the transition year, fewer students showed similar gains after that.
- Subsequent average gains in reading were quite low for grades 2 and 3, but approached 1.0 GE for grade 4.
- Subsequent average gains in mathematics fluctuated, with a large gain evident when students were promoted to grade 2, a small gain while they were in grade 3, and a gain of .97 GE for grade 4.

Figure 12. METZ TRANSITIONAL STUDENTS--
MEAN GE SCORES 1983-84 THROUGH 1987-88

	Gr.K 1983	GAIN	T1* 1984	GAIN	Gr.1 1985	GAIN	Gr.2 1986	GAIN	Gr.3 1987	GAIN	Gr.4 1988
READ	P.8	+1.38	1.15	+.78	1.93	+.66	2.59	+.45	3.04	+.93	3.97
MATH	P.9	+1.34	1.21	+.53	1.74	+1.27	3.01	+.34	3.35	+.97	4.32

*T1 = Transitional First Grade.

Note 1: N = 11.

Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENT: National norm is 1.8 for Grade 1 through 4.8 for Grade 4. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE for every year of instruction.

It appears the transition class at Metz was very effective in the short term, with most students showing gains greater than 1.0 GE for a year of instruction. These growth rates, however, were not sustained across time. The transition class participants therefore did not fare better than other first grade retainees in the long run.

SUMMARY/IMPLICATIONS

Data on the Metz transition class in 1983-84 and the 1986-87 transition program must be considered suggestive and not definitive. As with nearly all retention research, comparison groups are used rather than randomly assigned control groups. Differences in populations in the various programs may impact results in unknown ways. We can never know exactly what would have happened if those involved had been promoted rather than retained or vice versa. Still, results provide very interesting food for thought.

Results do not provide strong support for the notion that transitional classes are any better for low achievers' long-term achievement than is traditional retention. Short-term progress may be greater, but long-term is quite similar. Transition classes may be more effective if:

- They are designed as a two-year package, with modified curriculum in both the first, "transitional" year of placement in grade 1, and in the second year in which, if necessary, students are retained in grade 1;

- They are designed to lead to promotion, as in the case of second grade transitional students in 1987-88, (which is consistent with the on-grade-level philosophy currently being tried in the 16 priority schools);

- A higher percentage of students are promoted (those scoring close to grade level or attaining other set criteria);

- Students are provided with supplemental help throughout their school careers (a recognition that there are no quick fixes, and that these students will continue to need help to maintain reasonable growth rates). It is evident that most transitional students are "high maintenance" students.

Thus, based both on the 1983-84 and the 1986-87 results, it appears transition classes may produce larger gains initially than a regular first grade curriculum. For those not promoted at the end of the year, however, an alternative curriculum or some other way to build on transition class gains may be necessary to facilitate higher growth rates for these students. Providing continuity across years and an appropriately high level of challenge appear very important.

DISCUSSION

AISD and other districts are just exploring the success of alternatives to retention. Careful study of such efforts can help identify alternatives that are better--not just different. Our results are suggestive and perhaps somewhat surprising. Possible changes and refinements to consider in AISD's approaches came to mind as we worked through the data; readers are invited to form their own opinions and ideas on solutions for this complex dilemma.

Our impressions point to the vital role that supplemental help, expectations, continuity, level of challenge, and coordination play in working with these low-achieving students. In terms of expectations, the view of program goals held by the teacher and campus administration affects the curriculum and approaches used; this in turn affects the outcome for each student in terms of promotion, placement, or retention. A remediation focus may mean a slower pace and smaller gains for participants (see also PLUS results, ORE Pub. No. 83.10). Our impression is that if a teacher begins with the attitude that students will be retained, they generally are, sometimes <u>regardless of progress actually made</u> in the program. It appears that:

- Most important is providing these students with special help as needed, whether they are retained or placed. Most of these students will probably require some extra help over their entire school careers--they are "high-maintenance" students.

- Developing more systematic approaches for instructing <u>placed</u> students could be quite beneficial. This is especially appropriate in Priority Schools where on-grade-level instruction and heterogeneous grouping are being stressed. AISD could benefit from trying several approaches in various schools, working with ORE to set them up with structures that allow evaluation. An approach which appears promising involves grouping of students across grade levels in key subject areas (Slavin, 1987), so that they are instructed appropriately in all areas and not penalized with insufficient challenge in some areas (such as mathematics). Research done last year by ORE (Pub. No. 86.31) indicated it may not be detrimental to try placement into grade 2 with the option of retention for those who fail to show sufficient growth. Patterns of progress for low-achieving first graders retained in grade 2

along with cross-grade grouping or another approach) might result in a lower overall retention rate.

- Elementary transition classes which hold the most promise are those which assume most students will be placed or promoted at the end of the year, and attempt to cover the essentials of on-grade-level instruction rather than focusing on remediation of the past year's work. What is still lacking in most cases, it appears, is a continuous program between the transition teachers and the receiving teachers which capitalizes on the areas where students have shown the most growth.

- Finally, at the elementary level, teachers still appear to have a "retention mentality." From survey results, it appears that two thirds (65%) believe retention is effective for students with serious achievement problems (ORE Pub. No. 87.49). The issue may well be that each teacher's definition of "serious" varies. Students who are retained at one school, therefore, might not be at another. While mandating strict standards is not advocated, some discussion of standards, more precise guidelines, and training on whom to retain and place (whether in a regular or transitional class) might be very helpful to school staff.

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